ing of Turner, Constable, Vermeer, Rembrandt, most of the impressionists."

touch. And light seems to be present in the space – not on the wall, but in the space. It is not

journal of what I am seeing." A pause. "But it is in the same tradition."

have been doing this for ever. The artisans and architects who built the great cathedrals knew

lapsed, arte the 1960s fo on how to nam. "I di

LUDOVIC HUNTER-TILNEY
POP

Life in a parallel musical galaxy

Scott Walker has spent most of his erratic career failing to heed the advice of his hit "Make It Easy on Yourself". His commitment to making challenging music reaches a peak of sorts on his new album *The Drift*, which is so absurdly opaque and downbeat that you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Walker is the former heart-throb whose band The Walker Brothers rivalled The Beatles for popularity in the mid-1960s, crooning lushly orchestrated Burt Bacharach and Hal David ballads for hordes of screaming girls. But the singer hated the experience. A Europhile American who felt more inspired by Jacques Brel and existentialism than by *Ready Steady Go!* and Merseybeat (he once claimed to have moved to Europe to be nearer to Ingmar Bergman), he found pop stardom limiting and disorientating.

After fleeing to a monastery on the Isle of Wight amid rumours of a breakdown ("I went to learn Gregorian chants," he demurred), he emerged to launch a solo career whose initial success evaporated as his work grew more ambitious and difficult, alienating fans and record companies alike.

Since then his sporadic, challenging output and reclusive nature have made him into a cult figure, a 1960s survivor who unlike most of his peers is seen to have retained artistic integrity well into late-middle-age. No decline into bland MOR rock for him; no sniggering disrespect from younger generations. When he curated the South Bank Centre's Meltdown festival in 2000, performers such as Blur, Radiohead and Jarvis Cocker queued up to join the bill.

The Drift, his first album since *Tilt* in 1995, should do his cult appeal no harm, for it distances him so far from mainstream pop that it seems to exist in a musical galaxy of its own devising. Alternately unsettling and ridiculous, its clanking, industrial chords and weird outbursts of sound (one track features meat being pummelled) resemble a horror film scored by an avant-garde composer.

The songs lack melody or conventional structure, while the lyrics, sung by Walker in a heightened tenor that sounds like an anxious, spooked shadow of his old baritone vocals in The Walker Brothers, defy interpretation. "Polish/the fork/and stick/the fork/in him," he intones gravely in a track that is purportedly about war in Bosnia. "I'll punch a donkey in the streets of Galway!" he chortuses in another, mystifyingly. The album sleeve notes ask you to play this clammy, foreboding nonsense "at high volume". After doing so I felt I'd been trapped in someone else's nightmare, and was compelled to administer several restorative doses of Abba to bring myself round.

> There is something faintly magnificent about 'The Drift''s uncompromising aura of difficulty

Nonetheless there is something faintly magnificent about *The Drift*'s uncompromising aura of difficulty. It demands hard work from us and takes itself very seriously – and these are uncommon qualities in pop music, which is often timely and electrifying but rarely challenging. Today especially, in an age of ringtones and downloads, tunefulness and catchiness are pop's be-all and end-all: those ear-catching elements that make a song stand out. There is less patience for experimentation than ever.

In contrast Walker's music is dense and claustrophobic, and its layers of sound repay close attention as you notice their different ingredients: an exhausted rock'n'roll guitar in a song about Elvis Presley; a sampling of the harmonica motif from Sergio Leone's western *Once Upon a Time in the West*; a stray moment of humour when Walker sings: "You could easily picture this in the current top 10." Or another when he sums up the prevailing mood: "Don't think it hasn't been fun because it hasn't."

The problem with *The Drift* is that it repudiates pop's love of melody and accessibility without finding anything coherent to replace them with. Florid, melodramatic lyrics coexist with atonal, minimalist rhythms. Walker's singing is unvarying and monotonous. The doom-laden atmosphere proves to be suffocating. Its experimentalism is deeply indulgent: it expresses nothing so much as Walker's distance from and contempt for pop.

THE CRITICS

Breakfast with Jonny Wilkinson

Menier Chocolate Factory
London
SARAH HEMMING

With broken metatarsals and manager succession chaos throwing England's bid for World Cup glory into disarray before the team has even set foot in Germany, the Chocolate Factory has come to the rescue with a feel-good play about a time when England really did win a world cup. *Breakfast with Jonny Wilkinson* takes us back to that bleary early morning in 2003 when the golden boot of England's fly-half made a last-minute drop goal that confounded the Australian rugby team and put England, briefly, on top of the world.

Chris England's play, sadly, does not feature the real Mr Wilkinson. Instead, it uses that occasion to explore the power struggles in a provincial rugby club. It is a ridiculous play, yet still a very enjoyable one.

We are in the drab clubhouse of a struggling rugby club, where the only trophy, won by the women's team, has not been put on display because it would look lonely. Present are Dave, the club manager, and a journalist (played by the author) swigging bad white wine and hoping to observe the World Cup atmosphere in a typical rugby club bar. Only there is no atmosphere, because nobody has turned up.

CROSSWORD

No. 12,139 Set by GOZO

All the answers are place names around the world

ACROSS
1 Trifler loses his head in French department .... (6)
4 .... Island revolutionary in this one (6)
8 Living with us's no good in Baltic

DOWN
1 Amateur archaeological expedition on eastern Italian river (5)
2 Forest green in cathedral city (7)
3 Area Lucie in Wisconsin city (3,6)
5 A Roller – one's in French city (5)
6 Chartered accountant takes a spin